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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author discusses the need for educational reform that will make public schools more thorough and efficient, and at the same time more humane. These changes can best be realized, he argues, through a curriculum that is organized around a system of required educational competencies rather than around required courses. Instituting a statewide system of competency-based education will require a difficult political struggle, but this struggle can be made easier if reliable research findings are available on the cost and impact of competency-based curricula. Researchers can greatly aid the progress of educational reform, the author suggests, if they address the information needs of state educational officials and legislators and if they take care to present their findings in plain English that is readily understandable by laymen. (Author/JG)

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"USING RESEARCH TO TRANSLATE STATE POLICY INTO PRACTICE"
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I PROCEED HERE ON TWO ASSUMPTIONS:

1) WE ARE TALKING ABOUT REFORM AND NOT ABOUT MORE MODEST EFFORTS. WE ARE, THEREFORE, CONCERNED ABOUT CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NOT JUST CHANGES IN ANY ONE PROGRAM OR SET OF PROGRAMS.

2) WE ARE CONCERNED WITH THE ROLE RESEARCH CAN PLAY IN HELPING STATE LEVEL POLICY MAKERS SHAPE AND PURSUE THEIR VISION OF REFORM.

I HAVE CERTAIN STRONG BIASES ABOUT THE FIRST OF THOSE POINTS, AND I HAVE CERTAIN SUGGESTIONS TO MAKE TO YOU ABOUT THE SECOND. BASICALLY, I WILL PUT BEFORE YOU THE COURSE I AM TRYING TO CHART FOR SCHOOL REFORM IN PENNSYLVANIA AND INDICATE THE POINTS ALONG THAT COURSE WHERE SOLID RESEARCH OF THE RIGHT KIND COULD BE HELPFUL.

REFORM TO BE VALID MUST CONTINUALLY BE TESTED AGAINST TWO KINDS OF LITMUS: THE FIRST TO DETERMINE IF THE REFORM EFFORTS ARE MAKING THE SCHOOLS MORE THOROUGH AND EFFICIENT AND THE SECOND TO DETERMINE IF THEY ARE CREATING RELATIONSHIPS THAT ARE HUMANE.

EA 008 530

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA MANDATES A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC EDUCATION THAT IS "THOROUGH AND EFFICIENT". TWO IMPLICATIONS SHOULD BE NOTED.

THE MANDATE IS LAID UPON THE STATE, SPECIFICALLY THE STATE LEGISLATURE. ALL OTHER AUTHORITY IS DERIVED. THAT GIVES RISE TO A WHOLE RANGE OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STATE IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE LOCAL BOARDS OF EDUCATION ON THE OTHER. THOSE RELATIONSHIPS RAISE QUESTIONS OF POLICY, BUT THEY ALSO RAISE QUESTIONS OF STRATEGY AS I'LL INDICATE LATER.

THE SECOND IMPLICATION OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL MANDATE IS THAT WE MUST MEASURE THE THOROUGHNESS AND EFFICIENCY OF THE SYSTEM. SPECIFICALLY, WE NEED TO MEASURE HOW WELL STUDENTS ARE LEARNING.

ANY REFORM OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS MUST GUARANTEE THAT CRITICAL SKILLS AND UNDERSTANDINGS WILL BE LEARNED BETTER THAN IS CURRENTLY THE CASE.

THE SECOND TOUCHSTONE IS WHETHER THE SYSTEM IS HUMANE. THAT IS DETERMINED BY LOOKING AT THE SCHOOLS THROUGH TWO LENSES. THE FIRST EXAMINES WHETHER ATTENTION IS PAID TO THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT. DOES THE SYSTEM TAKE INTO ACCOUNT VARIATIONS IN LEARNING RATE AND STYLE? DOES IT PROVIDE FOR ALTERNATIVE TEACHERS, SETTINGS, TIMES AND CONTENT IN RESPONSE TO THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL?

THE SECOND LENSE FOCUSES ON THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS. HOW WELL DO STUDENTS, TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS AND THE COMMUNITY OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL GET ALONG? ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS IN THEMSELVES INSTRUCTIVE AND DO THEY CREATE A HELPFUL RATHER THAN A HARMFUL CONTEXT FOR LEARNING?

MANY OF THE TRENCHANT CRITIQUES OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOCUS ON THEIR LACK OF HUMANITY. I HAPPEN TO AGREE WITH MANY ELEMENTS IN THOSE ATTACKS. BUT FOR REFORM TO BE VALID AND TO STAND THE TESTS OF TIME AND THE BATTERING OF ORGANIZED OPPOSITION, IT WILL HAVE TO MEET THE CRITERION OF THOROUGHNESS AND EFFICIENCY AS WELL AS THAT OF HUMANITY: THE PUBLIC WANTS SCHOOLS THAT ARE EFFECTIVE, AS WELL AS PLEASANT.

I HAVE SOME HUNCHES ABOUT THE KIND OF REFORM THAT WILL MEET BOTH OF THESE TESTS. MY HUNCHES ARE BASED IN PART ON THE ACCUMULATED TRADITION OF WHAT DOES AND DOES NOT WORK IN RUNNING GOOD SCHOOLS. IN PART THEY STEM FROM MY EXPERIENCE OF WHAT WORKS IN THE WORLD OF POLITICS.

THOSE ARE THE INGREDIENTS OF ALL DECENT STATE OR FEDERAL POLICY. THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IS TO PUT SOLID GROUND UNDER THOSE HUNCHES.

I'LL BE SPECIFIC. I HOLD THE FOLLOWING OPINIONS ABOUT THE REFORMS WE OUGHT TO INSTITUTE IN PENNSYLVANIA TO PROVIDE QUALITY SCHOOLING.

1) THE SCHOOL CURRICULA OUGHT TO BE ORGANIZED AROUND A SYSTEM OF COMPETENCIES RATHER THAN COURSES. BY THAT I MEAN THAT WE MUST FIRST DETERMINE WHAT ADULTS MUST BE ABLE TO DO TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT AND FOR THAT OF SOCIETY. SCHOOLS SHOULD THEN BE ORGANIZED TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE DEVELOP THE SKILLS, THE UNDERSTANDINGS AND THE ATTITUDES NEEDED TO FULFILL THOSE ROLES. WE SHOULD REQUIRE STUDENTS

TO PERFORM TO MINIMUM LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT IN SKILL AND UNDERSTANDING AND REQUIRE INVOLVEMENT IN A LIMITED NUMBER OF EXPERIENCES TO STIMULATE ATTITUDES AND APPRECIATIONS. BEYOND THESE MINIMUMS THE CURRICULUM OUGHT TO BE PRETTY FLEXIBLE.

OPINION 2: WE OUGHT TO ELIMINATE THE RELIANCE ON TIME AND COURSES; WE MUST DEVELOP NEW AND VARIOUS FORMS OF EVALUATION AND CERTIFICATION. THOSE FIRMLY WEDDED TO THE TRADITIONAL SUBJECT-BASED CURRICULA WILL BE STRONGLY OPPOSED TO SUCH MOVES. BUT TO YIELD ON THESE POINTS IS TO LOSE THE BATTLE. REFORM TO BE EFFECTIVE NEEDS TO CHANGE THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SCHOOL DAY TO RESPECT THE DIVERSITY IN THE MATTERS TO BE LEARNED AND THE DIVERSITY AMONG THE STUDENTS LEARNING THEM. IT IS ALSO THE ONLY SURE WAY TO DEVELOP NEW AND FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STUDENTS AND THEIR TEACHERS.

OPINION 3: MANY OF THE COMPETENCIES CAN ONLY BE LEARNED IN PLACES AND FROM PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL. REFORM MEANS TAKING DOWN THE WALLS THAT SEPARATE THE SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY AND THE BARRIERS SEPARATING AGE GROUPS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL. BOTH OF MY CRITERIA CAN ONLY BE MET BY THIS EXPANSION OF LEARNING INTO THE REAL WORLD: IT IS MORE THOROUGH AND EFFICIENT (IF STUDENT OUTCOMES ARE THE TOUCH-STONE) AND IT IS MORE HUMANE.

OPINION 4: THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER WILL BECOME MUCH MORE DIVERSE, RANGING FROM LECTURER TO ORGANIZER OF GROUP OR INDIVIDUAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES. HELPING

TEACHERS ADJUST TO THOSE ROLES WILL MEAN CHANGES IN PRESERVICE AND INSERVICE TRAINING PROGRAMS.

OPINION 5: THE DETERMINATION OF THE SPECIFIC OUTCOMES THAT WILL GOVERN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM MUST BE DONE LOCALLY BY STUDENTS, PARENTS, TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS AND THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE. EACH MUST MAKE A PRIOR COMMITMENT THAT PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO TEACH THE OUTCOMES WILL BE SUPPORTED BY IN SCHOOL AND OUT OF SCHOOL PARTICIPANTS.

NONE OF THESE OPINIONS ARE NEW. ALL HAVE BEEN TRIED IN SOME FORM BEFORE. ALL ARE IN OPERATION IN SOME PLACES TODAY. ASIDE FROM OREGON, HOWEVER, I KNOW OF NO STATE THAT HAS ATTEMPTED TO INSTALL THESE APPROACHES IN ANY SYSTEMATIC WAY.

WE WANT TO MAKE SUCH AN ATTEMPT IN PENNSYLVANIA. IN FACT, OUR STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION HAS DIRECTED ME TO DO SOMETHING ALONG THESE LINES.

HOW COULD RESEARCHERS BE OF HELP?

1) TELL ME IF EXISTING COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEMS MEET MY TWIN TESTS. ENOUGH VERSIONS HAVE BEGUN SPRINGING UP AROUND THE COUNTRY TO PROVIDE MODELS FOR STUDY. IF THESE SYSTEMS MEET MY TESTS, TELL ME THEIR ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS. TO IMPLEMENT EVEN MODEST CHANGES, LET ALONE MAJOR REFORMS, I WILL HAVE TO GO TO THE MAT MORE THAN ONCE WITH LEGISLATORS, ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS, CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS, BUS DRIVERS, TAXPAYERS AND NEWSPAPER EDITORIALISTS. I WILL NOT ESCAPE UNSCATHED FROM THOSE BATTLES.

TELL ME WHAT I CAN AFFORD TO BARTER AWAY IN THE NECESSARY COMPROMISES WITHOUT SACRIFICING THE ESSENTIALS THAT MAKE IT GENUINE REFORM.

(COMMENT: OREGON'S TWIN SYSTEM A MISTAKE) (POLITICALLY NECESSARY?)

IF EXISTING COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEMS FAIL TO MEET MY TESTS, TELL ME WHY THEY ARE FAILING. IS IT A MATTER OF POOR DESIGN OR POOR PRACTICE? IN EACH CASE BE SPECIFIC ABOUT THE FAULTS AND SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES THAT WILL WORK.

2) TELL ME HOW MUCH ALL OF THIS WILL COST, BOTH IN FRONT-END COSTS AND ADDED EXPENSES ONCE THE REFORMS ARE IN PLACE. I WOULD LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT I AM TALKING ABOUT A REALLOCATION OF RESOURCES THAT SHOULD NOT IN THE LONG RUN INVOLVE MAJOR NEW COSTS. FIND OUT IF THAT IS RIGHT AND TELL ME BLUNTLY ONE WAY OR THE OTHER.

3) GIVE ME SOME REALISTIC ESTIMATES OF HOW LONG THIS WILL TAKE. WE ALMOST ALWAYS PICK OUR DEADLINES OUT OF THE AIR. DEADLINES ARE NEEDED TO PUT PRESSURES ON THE SYSTEM TO PRODUCE. BUT IF THEY ARE UNREALISTIC, THEY PROVIDE TARGETS THAT DISTRACT PEOPLE FROM THE REAL ISSUES.

4) EXAMINE, IF YOU WILL, SOME OF THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS OF STRATEGY THAT FACE A STATE AGENCY. AT WHAT POINT IN THE REFORM PROCESS SHOULD STATE MANDATE AND REGULATION BE BROUGHT TO BEAR? IS IT THE SINE QUA NON WITHOUT WHICH NO REAL CHANGE WILL OCCUR IN DISTRICTS? OR SHOULD IT ONLY FOLLOW UPON INTENSIVE TESTING OF MODELS

IN A VARIETY OF SCHOOLS? SHOULD DISTRICTS BE EASED INTO THE ACCEPTANCE OF REFORM BY GRANTS OF STATE MONEY? OR SHOULD THEY BE ASKED INSTEAD TO DEMONSTRATE THEIR COMMITMENT BY ALLOCATING PORTIONS OF THEIR OWN BUDGETS IN THE EARLY STAGES?

MY OWN ASSUMPTIONS ARE THAT STATE MANDATES ARE ESSENTIAL AT SOME POINT AND THAT THE DISTRICTS OUGHT TO BE REQUIRED TO REACH INTO THEIR OWN POCKETS FOR AT LEAST A PORTION OF THE MONEY. BOTH OF THOSE ASSUMPTIONS WILL GENERATE OPPOSITION AND IF I AM ON THE WRONG TRACK, I WOULD BE HAPPY TO BE SHOWN WHY.

INCIDENTALLY, WE ARE ENGAGED IN A MAJOR STUDY OF THE SCHOOL SUBSIDY SYSTEM IN PENNSYLVANIA THAT SHOULD PROVIDE US WITH SOME INTERESTING CONCLUSIONS ABOUT STATE FINANCE. WE ARE ATTEMPTING TO REDESIGN OUR EQUALIZATION FORMULAS, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WE ARE ASKING HOW STATE MONEYS, WHICH PAY 50 PERCENT OF THE COST OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE STATE, COULD BE USED TO BUY SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENTS IN THE SCHOOLS. HISTORICALLY, THE LEGISLATURE HAS SIMPLY ADJUSTED THE FORMULAS UPWARD WHEN STATE PAYMENTS FELL BELOW THE 50% MARK. BUT THAT NEW MONEY BOUGHT NO IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES OR OUTCOMES. WE ARE EXAMINING THE WISDOM OF SOME ALTERNATIVES.

THAT IS VALUABLE RESEARCH TO ME SINCE IT WILL ANSWER SOME QUESTIONS I'VE ACTUALLY GOT ON MY MIND. IT IS NOT RESEARCH IN A VACUUM.

THAT BRINGS ME TO MY FINAL SET OF SUGGESTIONS. SETTING EDUCATIONAL POLICY AT THE STATE LEVEL IS, LIKE POLITICS, THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE. RESEARCHERS, IF THEY HOPE TO MAKE USEFUL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REFORM OF THE SCHOOLS, NEED TO BE ATTUNED TO THE REAL WORLD IN WHICH LEGISLATORS AND STATE ADMINISTRATORS LIVE.

THAT REQUIRES, FIRST OF ALL, THAT YOU SPEAK ENGLISH. THAT MAY SOUND MUNDANE; BUT IT IS ESSENTIAL. FOR INSTANCE, THOUGH SOME OF MY OWN RESEARCH STAFF HAVE RAISED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS STUDY OF ADULT COMPETENCIES, I HAVE FOUND IT EXTREMELY USEFUL. PERHAPS ITS METHODS WERE TROUBLING TO THE PROFESSIONAL RESEARCHERS. BUT I TELL YOU THAT THE STUDY IS VALUABLE NOT JUST BECAUSE OF ITS FINDINGS, WHICH ARE STARTLING, BUT BECAUSE IT IS IN ENGLISH. I CAN PUT IT BEFORE MEMBERS OF THE STATE LEGISLATURE AND BEFORE THE PUBLIC AND IT HAS AN IMPACT.

SECONDLY, YOU SHOULD PAY SOME ATTENTION TO THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS AT THE STATE LEVEL. I SUSPECT THE DIVERSITY OF THE STATES DISCOURAGES THAT KIND OF RESEARCH. BUT IT WOULD BE USEFUL TO HAVE COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF THE LEGISLATIVE RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS ABOUT THE MOST EFFECTIVE ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES.

THIRDLY, HELP US TEST PUBLIC SENTIMENT. POLITICIANS WILL NEVER OUTRUN THE CROWD. BUT MEASURING THE MOOD OF THE CROWD IS LARGELY GUESSWORK. IT IS OBVIOUS, FOR INSTANCE, THAT THE PUBLIC WANTS SCHOOLS TO TEACH BASIC SKILLS. BUT WILL THEY SUPPORT

A COMPETENCY-BASED SYSTEM IN CONTRAST TO A COURSE AND TIME-BASED SYSTEM? AND WILL THEY SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING IN CONTRAST TO IN SCHOOL, CLASSROOM LEARNING? NO ONE IN PENNSYLVANIA HAS CLEAR ANSWERS TO THOSE QUESTIONS, THOUGH EACH OF US IN THE EDUCATIONAL BALLGAME HAVE GUESSES REFLECTING OUR OWN BIASES.

A FOURTH REAL-WORLD ISSUE: WHAT TRADE-OFFS MUST BE MADE WITH TEACHERS AND TEACHER UNIONS TO WIN SUPPORT FOR REFORMS THAT CHANGE THE TEACHING ROLE? AGAIN, WHAT ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF REFORM CANNOT BE TRADED AWAY?

FINALLY, A CONCERN THAT REACHES BEYOND THE SPECIFIC QUESTION OF REFORM BUT GREATLY AFFECTS IT: WHAT IS THE MOST APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO ADOPT IN RELATION TO THE STATES?

I AM INCREASINGLY CONCERNED THAT FEDERAL POLICY AND PROGRAMS ARE UNDERMINING THE ABILITY OF THE STATE TO RUN THEIR OWN PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS.

FOR INSTANCE, WE HAVE FOUGHT A BATTLE ROYAL TO PREVENT CONGRESS IN THE NEW VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT FROM FORCING US TO ESTABLISH A SEPARATE STATE BOARD OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION. TWO THINGS ARE WRONG WITH THAT: FIRST, STATES HAVE THE RIGHT TO DESIGN THEIR OWN GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS AND, SECONDLY, IT IS TERRIBLE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY. WE NEED TO INTEGRATE VOCATIONAL TRAINING INTO THE SCHOOLS, NOT ISOLATE IT MORE THAN IS NOW THE CASE.

IN PART, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BEGAN INTERVENING IN EDUCATION BECAUSE THE STATES WERE SLOW TO DEAL WITH CRITICAL ISSUES, PARTICULARLY DESEGREGATION AND THE EDUCATION OF MINORITIES, THE DISADVANTAGED AND THE HANDICAPPED. IN PART, IT WAS A RESPONSE TO OUR CRIES FOR MORE MONEY. BUT IN PART, PARTICULARLY OF LATE, IT IS SIMPLY A POWER PLAY. IN MY JUDGMENT, THE EVENTUAL IMPACT IS THE EROSION OF STATE AUTHORITY AND THE CREATION OF UNWIELDLY AND UNWORKABLE ADMINISTRATIVE AND GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES.

I SUGGEST AS A FINAL, FRUITFUL AREA OF RESEARCH FOR YOU THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL POLICIES ON STATE REFORM AND, MORE BROADLY, ON STATE GOVERNANCE.